

Divine Silence

By Allen Dvorak

In our secular conversations, we treat silence as permissive in some contexts and prohibitive in other contexts.

For example, if I ask someone if it is okay to do a particular thing and he makes no verbal response, I might interpret his silence as permission or assent. Under certain conditions, silence may be taken to mean tacit (implied) agreement.

On the other hand, if I give specific instructions to my son to purchase certain items at the grocery store with my money, he wouldn't reason that he could buy additional items because I didn't specifically forbid him to do so. His reasoning in that context would be based on the principle that he is authorized to buy those things I have specified. My silence regarding other items would not be viewed as authority (right) to purchase them.

Since we understand our silence will be interpreted in different ways (permissive or prohibitive) in different contexts, we need to observe how God intends His silence to be interpreted.

Part of the reason that we are uncertain about the authorship of Hebrews is that the author didn't identify himself in the beginning of the book. Instead, he moved immediately to the point of the book – the affirmation that Jesus is superior. The book of Hebrews gets off to a fast start as the author opens the book with the grand affirmation that Jesus has become “so much better” than the angels because He has inherited a more excellent name than they possess (1:4).

Having asserted this claim, the author then proceeded to defend it. He asked the question:

“For to which of the angels did He ever say: ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You?’” (v. 5).

The statement “You are My Son, today I have begotten You” is a quotation from Psalm 2:7. The second psalm is messianic and applies to Jesus, not the angels. **The author of Hebrews asked if God had said the same thing to any of the angels. It is a rhetorical question; the answer is an emphatic “No”! God was silent with respect to the angels receiving the position (name) of “son.”**

What would prevent one of the angels, however, from assuming the position of “son”? God had not expressly forbidden the angels from taking that position; He simply didn’t describe any of them in the same way as He had the Messiah. The only reason that no angel could assume the position of “son” was that God’s silence must be prohibitive.

Please note that the author’s argument for Jesus’ superiority to the angels depends upon no angel being allowed to assume the position of “son.” God didn’t “say” to any angel that he could be “son”; He didn’t expressly forbid it – He was silent about this. If an angel could treat God’s silence as permissive and assume the position of “son,” then the argument of the Hebrews author proves nothing.

The exact same argument is made with respect to the quotation in Hebrews 1:5b. The author of Hebrews wanted to know to which of the angels God said, “I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son”?

The quotation is apparently taken from 2 Samuel 7, from the midst of the Lord's comments to Nathan (intended to be relayed to David). It referenced David's seed, his son, and its application to the Messiah was commonly understood by the Jews of Jesus' day (Matthew 20:30; 21:9). This quotation by the author of Hebrews is merely an extension of the same argument previously detailed in this article.

At the conclusion of the first chapter of Hebrews, the author used the same form of argument, citing a quotation from Psalm 110. As with the previous Old Testament quotations, this statement was understood to apply to the Messiah (in fact, see Hebrews 1:3 & 10:12). "To which of the angels," the Hebrews writer asked, "has God said this?" Like the question of verse 5, it is rhetorical and the original readers of this epistle knew the answer. God never said this to ANY of the angels; He was silent about this. Again, **the validity of the author's argument depends on the way that God's silence is treated...and that argument only works if the divine silence is viewed as prohibitive.**

The significance of these arguments by the Hebrews author is that he was inspired. That means he wrote by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The way that the author of Hebrews treated God's silence was not just a reflection of how he thought about it; this was how the Holy Spirit treated God's silence...and it is clear that **the Holy Spirit argued from the prohibitive nature of divine silence.**

Should we conclude that, although the Holy Spirit argued from the prohibitive nature of the divine silence on this occasion, perhaps God's silence should be viewed as being permissive in other cases? Where is the evidence for this conclusion? What Scriptures support the view that "sometimes" God's silence is, in fact, permissive?

We must be careful that we do not confuse an absence of “specific authority” (divine statements mandating specific details) for silence. In many areas of life & worship, God HAS spoken, but His instructions are general enough to permit liberty in the fulfillment of the obligations placed upon His people. For instance, in the matter of music in worship, God has spoken – we are commanded to sing (Colossians 3:16). With regard to Christians using instruments of music, God has been silent. He has not specifically forbidden instruments, but He hasn’t authorized them either.

If the arguments in Hebrews are to be viewed as having “limited application,” how will we know when to treat divine silence as prohibitive and when to interpret it as permissive? What criteria should we use to tell the difference?

These questions are extremely important in-as-much as the silence of God has been used to justify (permit) many practices in religion. **Must God specifically forbid some practice for it to be unscriptural? Or is it enough that He has not authorized it?**